FAILED HUMOR AND ITS EFFECTS IN CONVERSATION

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"The one who understands [...] becomes himself a participant in the dialogue" (Mikhail Bakhtin).

The present article sets out to investigate failed humor in natural conversation settings. It aims at delineating two types of failed humor: unperceived humor, which may literally be taken in as a verbal attack towards the sender and rejected humor, which is perceived but purposely ignored in order to continue the conversation as it has been initially intended. It also attempts to oppose humorous versus failed humorous discourse. The theoretical framework used in the analysis of failed humor in this paper is partially based on P. Brown and S. Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) and J. Culpeper's Theory of Impoliteness (Culpeper *et al.* 2003).

Humor is generally viewed as a form of social communication in which an intentionally created language stimulus triggers some aesthetic pleasure in people's minds. It is a rare conversation in which one participant does not attempt to illicit laughter or respond with amusement. It is mostly used in informal speech and writing aiming at entertaining or provoking laughter in the recipients.

Humor can be broadly considered as a "particularly versatile strategy" (Bell 2009: 12) highly exploited by various senders in discourse to "construct identities" (Bell 2009: 159) and accomplish their own aims.

As an important socio-pragmatic strategy, humor is assigned a very significant role in regulating communications. Thus, it may be used as an ice-breaker in conversations to help build relationships or group solidarity, share amusing experiences, fill uncomfortable pauses, negotiate requests for favors and, sometimes, persuade.

However, it is not always the case when humor has positive effects on the on-going conversation and its participants. It may also offend and hurt the participants, bringing about misunderstanding and confusion, especially, when humor is ill-intended. Such instances of humor are referred to as failed or unsuccessful humor, as what seems funny to the sender, may appear very rude and impolite to the

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recipient and be rejected by him/her, or in some cases it may not be apprehended as such. Humor is generally unsuccessful when there is incongruity between the participants' speaking styles, resulting in an opposition between what is meant and how it is perceived.

Unlike proper humor, failed humor has been seriously understudied by scholars as it is generally conceptualized to disrupt the natural flow of amusing conversation, often leading to communication breakdowns and/or other unpleasant consequences such as: inadequate or rude rejoinders, silence or strain relationships.

Anyway, what makes failed humor studies interesting is based on the following:

(1) it is often attested in oral speech;
(2) it fulfills a variety of functions;
(3) it is always culture-bound and gender-specific.

Current research on unsuccessful humor has identified and focused on two distinct types of failed humor. According to N. Bell, there are cases where "humor is simply not perceived and cases where humor is perceived but rejected by the hearer" (Bell 2009: 14). It appears that failed humor in everyday interactions should be investigated only in context, because it entirely depends on the situation, the manner of speaking (spontaneous or planned speech), conversational conventions, shared knowledge and the participants' communicative competence and social role. Hence the precise nature of failed humor is revealed only in interaction, taking into account the particular effect it has on the senders and/or the recipients themselves.

Humor as an interactive phenomenon requires a high level of motivation from the sender and is defined by the following criteria suggested by Richard J. Alexander in his work *Aspects of Verbal Humor in English* (Alexander 1997: 10):

1. intention on part of the sender;
2. consciousness on part of the sender;
3. *malevolent* or *benevolent* intent;
4. purpose to amuse people;
5. general light-heartedness;
6. being witty.

In the context of failed humor, it is necessary to draw attention to one important factor related to the above criteria. It concerns the question of intentionality which occurs on a bidirectional basis (Norrick, Chiaro [eds.] 2009: 151), because humorous utterances are deliberately created by the senders and/or the recipients with an obvious intention to amuse each other. Yet, in case of failed humor interaction, intentionality is seen as unidirectional as it is manifest only either on the part of the sender or the recipient. Consequently, such conversations are disruptive in nature as the recipients (sometimes the senders) fail to perceive and are unconscious of the sender's humorous malevolent or benevolent intention, or reject it altogether.

It is worth mentioning that failed humor studies also lay special emphasis on the recipient and the perlocutionary effect of humorous acts, focusing explicitly on the linguistic levels of humor in verbal interactions. I. Ermida argues: "The humorous communication is characterized by a reciprocal relation between the intentions of the sender and the expectations of the recipient. In case of lack of receptiveness on the part of the interlocutor, for instance, the illocutionary potential of the message does not bear perlocutionary fruit" (Ermida 2008: 133). The result of such an interaction is obvious communication failure.

Unsuccessful humorous communication should mostly be regarded as an infraction of the pragmatic principles, especially of P. Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, which governs speech acts and which requires both participants to share truthful, relevant, non-ambiguous and clear information. However, there is no genuine cooperation or mutual constructions between the participants in failed humorous interaction. The sender deliberately encodes the illocutionary force of an utterance, so as to bring the recipient to an adequate presuppositional and interpretative frame. If the recipient is unable to make the necessary inferences from what is being said then there is lack of communication, moreover, the recipient may also become the victim or the very butt of the humorous tale. Consequently, it might be concluded that failed humor is also ruled by its own principles and specificities in communication which are characteristic only of this type of verbal interaction.

Considering failed humor studies, the issue of the social participant role (Alexander 1997: 11) is also very significant for it deals with such relevant factors as the text type of the humorous conversation, the manner of speech, and the role and the contribution of each participant to the creation of humorous utterances. Thus, taking into account that failed humor communication is considered to be unidirectional, one of the participants has the dominant role, structuring the conversations according to his/her rules.

Important observations concerning failed humor are revealed while analyzing samples of unsuccessful conversations showing obvious instances of pragmatic failure. Let us examine a few examples that display the infraction of the cooperative principle that in most of the cases are characterized by the sender's active participation and moves in the dialogue which have a tendency to become sometimes monological and which, in the long run, remain either incomprehended or ignored by the recipient. All the illustrative examples are taken from the movie "Meet the Fockers", an American comedy full of humorous situations among the members of two different families, whose children are going to marry soon. The participants' age ranges from 25 to 63 and they are not very good and intimate friends yet. Most of the conversations take place between two participants; however, there are cases when more people join the discussion. Out of 18 cases of failed humor found in the movie under analysis only some of the most interesting examples are presented below:

(1) – Oh, yeah. I've heard about this, this baby signing stuff. This is like cutting edge. Like...
– Yeah. Well, at this age, Greg, his mind is like a sponge. Look, when he reaches your age, for example, his mind will be far less capable of absorbing useful information.
– So cute. Hey, can I hold him?

(2) – I like that thing. Hey, do you mind if I, uh, make a little announcement?
– Well...
– Only the captain gets to make an announcement.
– You want to honk the Um...
– Sure.
– Only the captain gets to honk the horn.
– (*Silence*)...

(3) – Hey!
– Would you like some company, Greg?
– Uh, yeah. If you can't sleep.
– Go on. Have a seat.
– How about a cappuccino?
– Oh, you don't have to do that.
– It's no problem for me.
– Really? Yeah? Okay.
– Dina! Wake up and make Greg a cappuccino! Shake a leg, woman.
– Jesus, Jack, you know, I'm not that tired.
– Really. Relax, Greg. This cockpit's completely soundproofed. You should've seen the look on your face.
– Okay, okay. You got me. That was – That was a good one.
– Yes, it was. Yes.
– It's funny.

(4) – What's that?
– It's you. It's the Wall of Gaylord.
– The Wall of Gaylord?
– Isn't it nice to finally display your accomplishments, Son?
– Honey, look at all your awards.
– That's great.
– He's my champion.
– Oh, I didn't know they made ninth place ribbons.
– Oh, Jack, they got them all the way up to the 10th place. (*Silence*)...

(5) – This one looks impressive. "Mazel tov, Gaylord M. Focker. World's Greatest Nurse". Very nice.
– We've always tried to instill a sense of self in Gaylord without being too goal-oriented. It's not about winning or losing, it's about passion. We just want him to love what he's doin'. You know what I mean, Jack?
– Not really, Bernard. I think a competitive drive is the essential key that makes America the only remaining superpower in the world today.
– (*Silence*)... Well, whatever works. Mmm-hmm.

(6) – Mom, didn't you just take Little Jack back to the room?
– I'm monitoring him from a high-powered multidirectional microphone planted in his crib.
– Oh, baby monitors. Hidden cameras.
– Whatever happened to a little thing called privacy?
– Bernie, surveillance technology has helped protect a lot of the freedoms that we as Americans – take advantage of today.

– He's right. It has been good.
– S- son that is bullcrap in a chef's salad. Jack, tell me one smart thing the CLIA has done and I'll give you the deed to her house.
– The CLIA?
– The Central Lack of Intelligence Agency.
(*Silence*)...

(7) – No, Dina, come on, you and I will take on Jack and Roz. Come on, Jack, it'll be fun, we'll swap wives.
– (*Angry look, silence, no smile*)...
– Don't worry; you'll get her back after the game.
– (*Silence*)... (*Laughter from others*).

As is documented above, all the examples contain conspicuous witty remarks or twists made by the senders which are expressed in a direct or indirect way mostly in the form of wisecracks, as in: (1) "Look, when he reaches your age, for example, his mind will be far less capable of absorbing useful information"; (6) "The Central Lack of Intelligence Agency", sarcastic remarks, for instance: (4) "Oh, Jack, they got them all the way up to the 10th place"; (5) "Not really, Bernard. I think a competitive drive is the essential key that makes America the only remaining superpower in the world today"; (7) "No, Dina, come on, you and I will take on Jack and Roz. Come on, Jack, it'll be fun, we'll swap wives", or punch lines, as in: (2) "Only the captain gets to honk the horn"; (3) "Dina! Wake up and make Greg a cappuccino! Shake a leg, woman".

It is absolutely evident that in Examples (1), (2), (3), (6), (7) the sender's attempts at being witty are more obvious, while in Examples (4), (5) the sender's intention to ridicule and make fun of the other participant is rather interpretative, depending on the context in which the conversation takes place. As far as the type of the text is concerned, wisecracks and sarcastic utterances are spontaneous, context bound, ongoing, linear and temporally limited. They become meaningless out of context. Jokes, on the other hand, are regarded as context–free, time-independent, structured and complete texts.

Given the fact that some instances of humor may fail to generate any humor support from the recipients, the sender's humorous utterances can be classified according to the 5-point model (Bousfield, Locher [eds.] 2008: 134) suggested by J. Culpeper, while referring to the issue of impoliteness in language. A close analysis of the senders' humorous attempts shows that bold on record impoliteness strategies are used in Examples (2), (3), (5), (6); there is one case of negative impoliteness strategy in Example (7); off-record impoliteness strategies are found in Examples (1), (4), (5). In P. Brown and S. Levinson's terms (Brown, Levinson 1987: 70), the sender provides no effort to reduce the threats to the other's face in all these examples. Thus, from the provided context it is possible to assume that these funny situations involving humor of words are intentionally provoked by the senders.

Another worthy observation relates to the facts that in all the examples under consideration the sender's obvious humorous utterances do not have broad appeal.

The recipient's reaction to the humorous discourse is rather unordinary due to a different understanding of the referents involved. Contrary to all the expectations concerning humorous communication, which is constructed, according to P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987), on shared understanding in order to maintain each other's faces and make the participants feel good while interacting, in Examples (1) – (7) humor somehow fails to spark. As a result, the recipients do not find the ongoing discourse amusing and they shape their subsequent responses and behaviors accordingly. Thus in this context, R. Ames notes: "the need to "explain" a joke is a symptom of a failure in communication, and it as it were cuts the flow of current that makes it funny" (Ames at al. 1991: 101).

Analyzing how the recipients react to all the humorous challenges framed by the senders, it becomes clear that there is mostly positive impolite response in return and the sender's interactional goals are not fully accomplished. According to J. Culpeper, positive impoliteness means "the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants" (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555) by ignoring, snubbing, excluding the other participant from the speaking activity, by employing "inappropriate identity markers or obscure secretive language" (*ibidem*) which leads to discord in conversations. Thus, the recipients' rejoinders illustrated above include nonverbal reactions (laughter, silence, averting or maintaining eye-contact), metalinguistic comments and comments that assess the situation of failed humor as a whole. Obviously, such misunderstandings between the participants do not lead to increased productivity in conversation; on the contrary, it increases the social distance between both parties, emphasizing one of the possible negative effects of failed humor.

In Examples (2), (4), (6), (7) the recipients fail to recognize the sender's humorous intentions altogether resorting to such discourse strategy as silence. As a rule, silence is viewed as being very meaningful and N. Bell states that in case of failed humor communication "silence can be used to indicate lack of amusement" (Bell 2009: 148). From the perspective of impoliteness theory, such conversational moves are considered offensive and impolite because there is no output from the recipients; moreover, they take no efforts to reduce the face threatening acts for the sender.

Example (7) seems to be of special interest for analysis here as it has to do with a double case of unperceived humor which is well integrated into one sample conversation between two males approximately of the same age, who take great pains to find common language. Obviously, the sender (Bernard) challenges the recipient (Jack) by uttering a sarcastic remark which is meant to tease him and minimize the tense relationship that exists between them: "No, Dina, come on, you and I will take on Jack and Roz. Come on, Jack, it'll be fun, we'll swap wives". The result of such a humorous instigation is rather unexpected for the sender. The recipient does not perceive the joke and consequently, does not reply anything in return. He is not aware of the sender's cunning plan and this is very well conveyed by his body language, namely, his facial expression which bears a stern look of sudden concern for his "property", that is, wife. However, the sender is not happy with such a turn and his follow-up move has a double-fold meaning: it works to

soften the negative assessment of his own face by using a defensive strategy and, on the other hand, it is again directed to challenge and attack the recipient's lack of humor by applying a negative politeness strategy: "Don't worry; you'll get her back after the game".

Following A. Zajdman's (1995) and N.D. Bell's (2009) views regarding failed humor, it is worthy to consider the question of whether joking is face threatening for the sender's or the recipient's own face. According to N.D. Bell, it is the speaker who is subject to verbal attacks and face threatening acts due to the fact that his/her humorous attempts are unperceived or rejected. Moreover, from the researcher's perspective, it appears to be a dual failure for the simple reasons that the sender "has not only disrupted the ongoing talk, but has also failed to entertain" (Bell 2009: 158). A. Zajdman assumes that humor may be face threatening for the recipient as well, especially, if he/she responds positively and agrees with the sender's humorous remarks expressed either on-record or off-record (Zajdman 1995: 326). Yet, in Examples (2), (4), (6), (7) the senders threaten their own face in a joking manner, because of the fact that the recipients fail to grasp the senders' subtle humorous undertones.

In a related vein, rejection of humor is displayed in Examples (1), (3), (5) where the recipients' strategy is to deliberately ignore the senders' clear attempts at humor and go on with the conversation. As a result, commonly attested rejections in the movie "Meet the Fockers" run as follows:

(1) – So cute.
(3) – Okay, okay. You got me. That was – That was a good one (*smiling*). [...] It is funny (*pretending to laugh*).
(5) – (*Silence*)... Well, whatever works. Mmm-hmm.

It has been interesting to observe that in Examples (1), (5), the recipients' rejoinders to humor are rather positive, conveying agreement by resorting to positive impoliteness strategies conveyed via such language means as complementing "so cute" made with the help of the intensifier "so", and the pragmatic marker "Well, whatever works. Mmm-hmm". However, given the fact that they apprehend the senders' humorous intentions, they still choose to ignore them completely by continuing talking. In such a way, the recipients not only reject the sender's attempt at humor, but also threaten their own identities, that is, face claims.

According to Richard J. Alexander, various forms of rejections or the "metalanguage" of failed humor are considered to be useful "means of testing the intentions of the collocutors" (Alexander 1997: 13). In the situation described in the movie there is no close relationship between the participants in failed humor conversations, more than this, they are enemies, therefore it is not surprising at all that such misunderstanding in communication occurs. The participants' efforts to establish some sort of friendly rapport by means of humor is completely blocked. In several cases the senders and recipients have malevolent intentions aiming at mocking openly at each other. This is especially obvious in Examples (3), where

one deals with an instance of strong sarcasm or "mock politeness" (Culpeper 2011: 215): "Okay, okay. You got me. That was – That was a good one". It is an off-record response to failed humor viewed as a negative impoliteness strategy which basically aims at highlighting the power difference and social distance between the participants, and namely, between would-be father-in-law and son-in-law.

Some other forms of rejections encountered in the same movie are:

– That's a good icebreaker (*patting father on the shoulder*).
– That was a good one (*accompanied by the other participants' laughter*).
– Of course, I'm... Yes.
– Honey, your father thought that it'd be fun to share stories about our first time. Really? That sounds like fun. That's... (*Silence, sudden change of topic*).
– No, it's okay.
– That was just a joke. I'm sorry. I was – I was just trying to help you, Gay.
– Thanks for that, Greg (*avoiding eye-contact*).
– That is great (*maintaining eye-contact*).
– They wouldn't (*maintaining eye-contact*).
– (*Laughter*)...

Having a sense of humor is an essential characteristic of many human beings, regardless of the cultures they belong to. It gives them confidence and ease in maintaining a conversation and social rapport or group identity with other recipients. Lack of sense of humor is usually treated as disparaging and negative, conveying the idea that an individual is not able to perceive things from a different perspective and therefore, he/she does not associate well with the group he/she belongs to.

A close examination of failed humor conversations depicted in the popular comedy "Meet the Fockers" has revealed the following data: out of 18 instances of unsuccessful humor only 6 conversation samples are classified as unperceived humor and 12 conversation samples are labeled as rejected humor.

The most common responses to failed humor run as follows:

Unperceived humor responses (6):
- Silence = 4
- Silence + sender's defensive strategies to mitigate the loss of his own face = 2

Rejected humor responses (12):
- Comments or laughter = 8
- Sarcastic or mock politeness (accompanied by laughter or minimal response) = 4

In terms of strategies used by the participants in their rejoinders, the overall data includes:

Positive impolite strategies = 40, involving: silence (8), ignoring the other participant (7), looking disinterested, unsympathetic (concerned) (4), maintaining or averting eye-contact (3), making the other participant feel uncomfortable (13), snubbing the other (2), laughter (3).

Negative polite strategies = 6, encompassing: invading the other participant's space (1), challenging the recipient (1), mock politeness (4).

Summing up, it is noteworthy to point out the idea that the number of strategies always exceeds the number of responses involved in failed humorous conversations, as each rejoinder may be made of several different, non-exclusive strategies such as gestures and/or metalanguage. They acquire meaning only by being considered together in conversation.

In conclusion, this paper has argued that there are two types of failed humor which are the result of an unsuccessful communication between two or more participants. Both unperceived humor and rejected humor are produced in joint interactions and its consequences and effects only emphasize the social distance, the power difference and the participants' degree of imposition in conversation.

The study has used the concept of face and impoliteness to analyze the sender's humorous instigations and the recipient's rejoinders in failed humor conversations. It has been found that failed humor defies the expectations of the participants in conversations, especially, when there is no congruity of perceptions, points of reference and values concerning common issues. The strategies used in such-like conversations rely heavily on the participants' level of politeness and face concern. The results of the study have shown that face-threatening acts in failed humor conversations employ mostly bold on record, off-record and negative impoliteness strategies with the general aim to attack the recipient's face by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other. In their turn, the responses to failed humor have displayed a range of positive impoliteness strategies which have been intended to damage the recipient's positive face wants by impeding the humorous conversation to unfold.

In close, it is worth mentioning that failed humor is a relatively fragile topic and failed humor studies are still open to much research and interpretation.

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FAILED HUMOR AND ITS EFFECTS IN CONVERSATION

ABSTRACT

The humor, one of the most important socio-pragmatic strategies, has a great significance in coordinating the daily conversations. Nevertheless, the humor does not always have positive effects on interactants. Humor can affect them, and this often causes misunderstanding or confusion in conversation, leading to failed communication. Or, what is funny for the emitter can be rude or offensive to the receiver.

In this article, we inquire the issue of communication failure in terms of unperceived or rejected humor. The research is based on the American film "Meet the Fockers". Failure in conversation and, respectively, the situations of failed humor, happen when it prevail a disagreement between the interactants' styles of expression.

Key-words: *failed humor, unperceived humor, rejected humor, unsuccessful conversation, politeness, impoliteness, sender, recipient, strategy.*

CUPTORUL ŞI PRAGUL – REPERE SACRE ÎN SPAŢIUL CASNIC: OBICEIURI LA NAŞTERE

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Cercurile concentrice trasate în jurul mamei şi al oricărei persoane ce trece printr-o schimbare de statut ontologic se conturează pe două tipuri de coordonate: temporală şi spaţială. Aflate în directă legătură, timpul şi locul de recluziune impun respectul faţă de divinităţile casnice cu care se identifică un anumit punct al gospodăriei, fiindcă acestea sunt capabile să asigure binele familiei, dar şi să pedepsească în mod crunt impietăţile.

Nucleul existenţei umane îl constituie, la români şi multe alte popoare, *vatra* casei, un spaţiu care unifică planurile multiple ale lumii. Pentru dimensiunea fenomenală a prezentului, ea oferă căldură şi hrană. Divinaţiile şi invocaţiile făcute la gura cuptorului influenţează în plan magic evenimentele din viitor, în timp ce cultul strămoşilor care se întrezăreşte în sacralizarea acestui spaţiu face legătura cu trecutul neamului. Acest *summum* al percepţiei omeneşti vine din milenii de istorie culturală şi de pe teritorii uriaşe ale globului pământesc locuite de civilizaţii diverse. Petru Caraman a sintetizat amploarea fenomenului în studiul dedicat obiceiului ce poartă numele *căderea pe vatră* (Caraman 1988). Semnificaţia cuptorului are o valenţă sinecdotică, fiindcă el reprezintă gospodăria însăşi şi adeseori ţara natală. Vatra se identifică astfel cu divinitatea focului ce protejează casa şi devine, în opinia savantului ieşean, un altar şi un lăcaş al spiritului sacru tutelar.

Cultul vetrei apare la popoarele romanice, germanice, fino-ugrice, turco-tătare, slave şi la neogreci, iar dintre divinităţile focului adulate de acestea, Petru Caraman menţionează pe Hestia de la greci, Vesta la romani, Tabiti (sciţi), Agni, din vechea Indie, Polengabia de la prusaci, Ponyke şi Aspelenie, întâlnite la lituanieni, popor la care există şi zeitatea Gabija, cu aceleaşi atribute (vezi şi Greimas 1997: 182). Cărturarul ieşean face o subliniere relevantă în cazul poporului iranian care venerează pe *nmânô-paiti*, care, în traducere, înseamnă „stăpânul casei". La romani, divinitatea focului cumulează atributele Penaţilor, spiritele părinţilor şi strămoşilor, responsabili mai ales cu bunăstarea materială, ale Larilor, entităţi telurice, şi ale Manilor, în care se transformau sufletele morţilor îngropaţi în incinta casei. Obiceiul

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